

Past Present

from a century of conservation to the present day





20 YEARS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Story By Patricia Stockdill

Photos By Craig Bihrl

Jim Ringelman was a Colorado Division of Wildlife waterfowl biologist when the North American Waterfowl Management Plan launched in 1985. A year earlier, Congress authorized the Conservation Reserve Program and Swampbuster and Sodbuster provisions.

This (NAWMP) could be the last chance to save waterfowl, Ringelman thought at the time. Now serving as Ducks Unlimited Great Plains Regional Office director of conservation programs for the Dakotas and Montana, Ringelman's organization is one of several partners working through NAWMP to, indeed, help save ducks.

CRP and NAWMP were not intentionally created to compliment each other, said Ringelman and Kevin Willis, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service private lands coordinator. They came about in separate years for separate reasons – the poor state of land in the United States with crop overproduction, eroding soils, drained wetlands and vanishing grasslands, resulting in waterfowl populations hitting record lows in the mid-1980s.

NAWMP introduced a novel concept to conservation – the partnering of countries, state and federal agencies, landowners, businesses and conservation organizations to improve waterfowl habitat and duck populations. NAWMP first developed between the United States and Canada. Mexico joined later. Armed with North American Wetlands Conservation Act funding and matching funds from its partners, joint ventures around the country developed habitat projects to help meet NAWMP goals.

North Dakota is part of North America's Prairie Pothole Region and a Prairie Pothole Joint Venture partner. The Prairie Pothole Region produces nearly half of North America's ducks. The U.S. portion is one of the most important joint ventures for habitat, duck production and NAWCA funding.

The initial challenge was to mesh the various agencies and groups, Willis said. Early projects epitomized the meaning of "partner" and continue to do so today. Agencies such as the FWS, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and North Dakota Game and Fish Department teamed with Ducks Unlimited, North Dakota Natural Resource Trust and private landowners to restore wetlands – especially those in CRP – develop wetlands and nesting islands, place nesting structures and build predator control enclosures.

It was important, especially in the early years of NAWMP, to create tangible projects that not only improved habitat and nesting success, but provided visible evidence of partnering success, Ken Sambor said.

Sambor, now with the Northern Great Plains Venture encompassing parts of Montana, western North Dakota, and Wyoming, was involved with NAWMP since its inception as Game and Fish Department NAWMP coordinator. Having successful, on-the-ground projects helped address hard issues of landscape conservation, he said, eventually leading to an influence on national policy, such as the farm bill and CRP.

While restoration projects continue, a shift has occurred in recent years toward protecting existing habitat through conservation easements. Ducks Unlimited again plays a key partner role in North Dakota, providing nongovernment funding for perpetual grassland easements through its Grasslands for Tomorrow program. Easements are a tool for landowners who want to continue using the land as is. "North Dakota is blessed in still having more productive natural habitat than just about anywhere else," Ringelman said.

After 20 years of NAWMP, Sambor can point to many successes in North Dakota and the PPJV region. The biggest success may be the amount of NAWCA funding directed toward wetlands and grasslands, he said. Another major success is the influence on policy makers and politicians regarding the importance of CRP to NAWMP and continuation of CRP in every farm bill since 1985.



Most wetlands in North Dakota were dry within a few years after NAWMP launched in 1986.

Science

CRP accounts for just 6 percent of the Prairie Pothole Region's land area, yet produces 30 percent of duck hatching success. CRP increases duck productivity in adjacent cover types, such as native prairie. Biologists can now identify areas of highest duck densities by coupling databases of wetland distribution with scientific knowledge of how ducks "settle" in the landscape during breeding season. Data gleaned from FWS waterfowl population and habitat surveys, conducted since 1987 as part of the PPJV monitoring program, provide the critical foundation.

Not all of that information would have been available without the Habitat and Population Evaluation Teams.

The FWS's Habitat and Population Evaluation Teams in Bismarck and Fergus Falls, Minnesota, bring science, research, and data together, providing information to help determine where conservation projects can best be targeted to attain NAWMP's long-term goals. Creation of HAPET offices advanced efforts to reach NAWMP goals, Ringelman said.

HAPET was established in 1989, the same year the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture launched, said Ron Reynolds, HAPET project leader, Bismarck. NAWMP was the catalyst for developing a better understanding of waterfowl and waterfowl habitat, he said. With information gathered by HAPET, in conjunction with partners such as U.S. Geological Survey, state agencies, Ducks Unlimited, and Delta Waterfowl, biologists can better assess programs, direct money to projects that provide the most benefit, and influence national policy.



Ray Heupel, Medina, restored a wetland as part of a NAWMP project in the early 1990s.

Conservationists have long touted the importance of CRP in NAWMP'S success, as well as its role in benefiting other wildlife species. Data collected and analyzed by HAPET and its partners provides scientific advances to support their argument.

Challenges

Conservation organizations and wildlife agencies have successfully lobbied to retain CRP in past Congressional debates, but the 2007 farm bill may be their greatest challenge yet.

The farm bill will have a major effect on the future farm landscape, said Reynolds. CRP re-enrollment is critical, said Lloyd Jones, FWS refuge coordinator.

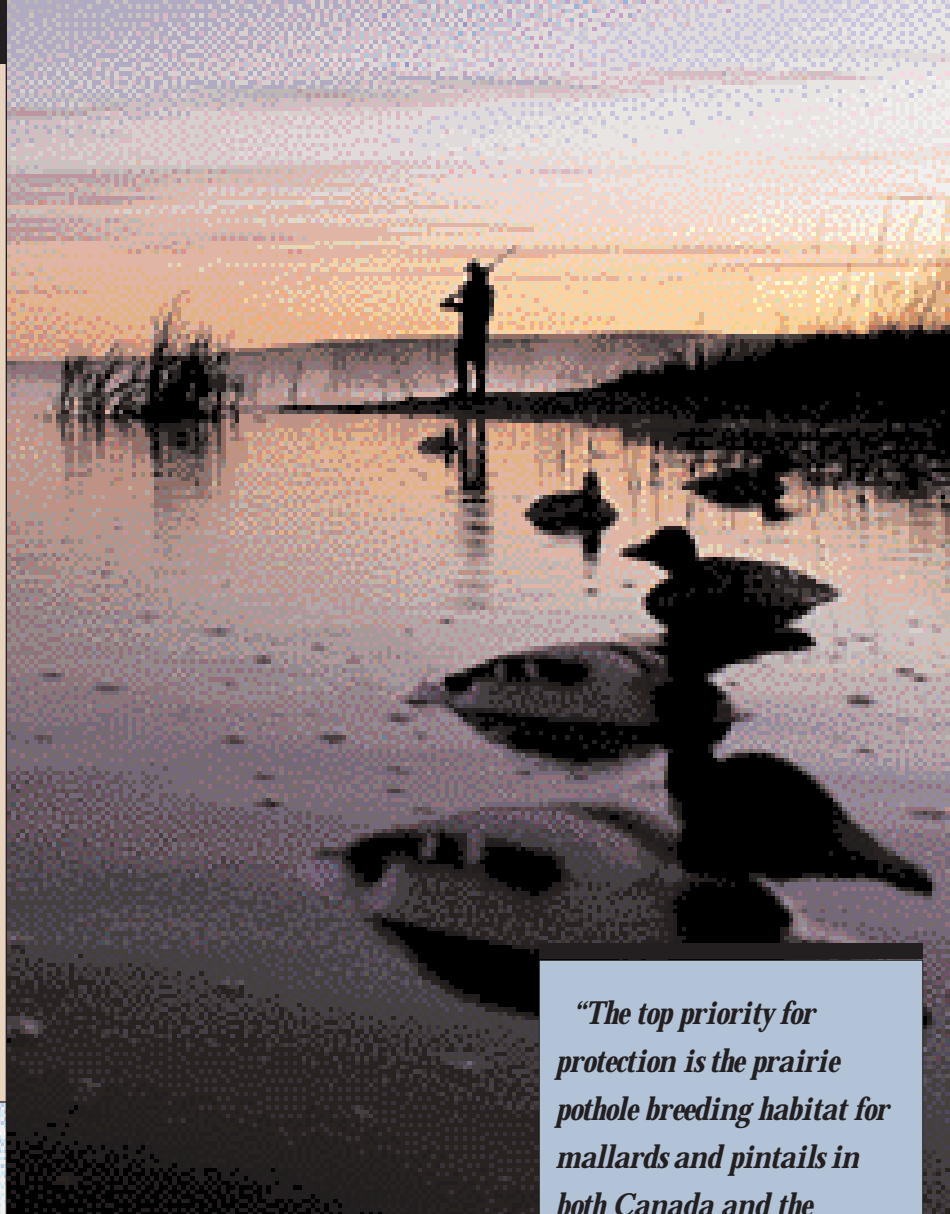
The situation is different as NAWMP begins its 21st year, Ringelman said. There are increasing incentives for producers to convert or not re-enroll CRP or break up native prairie with increasing demands for bio-fuels. They must also weigh other issues such as the cost of crop production and farm subsidies associated with crops versus livestock.

There will always be pressure to go back to intensive farming, Sambor said. However, gains have been made, in large part through farm bill programs, for many producers to incorporate conservation into their farming practices. The challenge will be how much we can afford or are willing to set aside for wildlife conservation, he said.

Funding remains a limiting factor despite ongoing presidential and Congressional support for NAMWP through NAWMCA appropriations. Funding has increased since 1985 and is now more than \$40 million per year. Even so, the demand from landowners wanting to participate exceeds available funding. For example, more than 100 landowners are on a conservation easement waiting list, Willis said, and other projects await.

Hunters, through their support of state wildlife agencies and conservation organizations, have been a major financial contributor. Yet efforts are underway to expand NAWMP and NAWCA dollars from waterfowl to all birds as a priority in conservation projects. Part of that effort stems from benefits for nongame birds and other wildlife populations that resulted from improved habitat. "Every acre, every dollar has benefited species not hunted," Jones said.

Wetlands preservation and Conservation Reserve Program grasslands are key factors in North Dakota's improved waterfowl hunting since the early 1990s.



"The top priority for protection is the prairie pothole breeding habitat for mallards and pintails in both Canada and the United States. Deterioration of habitat in this prairie area has been the principal cause of decline in abundance of these species."

North American Waterfowl Management Plan, 1986.



As hunter numbers continue to decline, funding could be an even greater issue, Sambor said. "The question is: 'Who funds conservation programs if there aren't hunters?'" he asked. So far, many nonconsumptive conservation organizations have provided limited financial input for matching project dollars. Their input, while vital, has largely been in the realm of advocating policy and education, Ringelman said.

NAWMP was a direct result of record low waterfowl populations, created during a time when the fall flight of ducks numbered about 60 million, the lowest since the 1950s. With a combination of improved habitat and a cooperative Mother Nature bringing the return of water and wetlands to the prairie, duck numbers grew to a record 100 million birds during the fall flight in 2000.

While much depends on weather, NAWMP will be crucial to what duck populations will be in the future. "I hope we don't have to relive everyone's history," Ringelman said.

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"In the future, (North American Waterfowl Management) Plan success or failure will continue to be linked to long-term trends in waterfowl habitat conditions in the Prairie Pothole Regions."

North American Waterfowl Management Plan, 2004 Strategic Guidance.

Duck eggs and ducklings are common sites in North Dakota, which is part of North America's Prairie Pothole Region. The Prairie Pothole Region produces nearly half of North America's ducks.

NORTH DAKOTA INFLUENCE

Two North Dakotans will play a major role in keeping North American Waterfowl Management Plan goals on track in the next several years.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Terry Steinwand is the Central Flyway's nominee to the North American Waterfowl Conservation Council, replacing retiring South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Secretary John Cooper. The council reviews project proposals submitted by joint ventures across the United States and divvies North American Wetlands Conservation Act project funding based on a priority system.

The nomination is a federal cabinet-level appointment. Steinwand will know in coming months if the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior approves his nomination. Council members include representatives from Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Conservation Fund, and Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific flyways, each represented by a state wildlife agency director, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service director.

While having a North Dakotan represent the Central Flyway will be beneficial to the state, Steinwand said he cannot and will not be parochial in supporting only North Dakota for Prairie Pothole Joint Venture funding. However, it is another opportunity for the Dakotas, he said, and Cooper did an excellent job in garnering support for the nation's duck factory, the Prairie Pothole Region.

Randy Kreil, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief, will be the Central Flyway representative on the North American Waterfowl Management Plan committee, responsible for maintaining, upgrading, and adjusting NAWMP. The plan, in turn, drives North American Wetlands Conservation Act funding. "It's important to have somebody from a production state to remind people of that when they make decisions," Kreil said, "The Prairie Pothole Region must be a top priority because that's where the ducks come from. What drives duck hunting and duck populations is what happens on breeding grounds and that's the prairie."



BY THE NUMBERS

North American Waterfowl Management Plan and North American Wetlands Conservation Act in North Dakota

- Seven North Dakota project areas funded by NAWCA, whose funds help attain NAWMP goals – Devils Lake Basin, Chase Lake Prairie Project, Northern Coteau, North Dakota Drift Prairie Project, Mouse River, Missouri River Corridor, and North Dakota Great Plains.
- Devils Lake Basin funding – \$3.05 million with projects in 1990-91, 1996, 2000 and 2003.
- Chase Lake funding – \$5.89 million with projects in 1991-92, 1994, 1996, 1998-2001, 2004 and 2005.
- Northern Coteau funding – \$5.5 million with projects in 1993, 1997-98, 2000-02 and 2005.
- North Dakota Drift Prairie funding – \$2.92 million with projects in 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000 and 2003.
- Mouse River funding – \$2.19 million with projects in 1994-95, 1997, 2000 and 2002.
- Missouri River Corridor funding – \$1.08 million with projects in 1991 and 2004.
- North Dakota Great Plains funding – \$583,000 with projects in 1994, 1998, 2003 and 2004.
- NAWCA grant applications have been submitted in 2006 for Chase Lake VII, Drift Prairie I, and Missouri Coteau V projects totaling \$3 million. A \$1 million grant application will be submitted in July for North Dakota Great Plains.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contributed \$11.8 million toward NAWCA projects to help meet NAWMP goals.
- Other nonfederal matches in North Dakota came from Ducks Unlimited, \$6.5 million; North Dakota Game and Fish Department, \$6.7 million; North Dakota Wetlands Trust, \$2.9 million; The Nature Conservancy, \$1.8 million; Delta Waterfowl, \$768,347; and other private individuals, landowners, businesses and corporations, \$5.86 million.
- 30 habitat projects – 133,701 acres of protected, restored and enhanced wetlands and 666,824 acres of protected and enhanced uplands.
- North Dakota has received \$22.1 million in NAWCA grants.
- The state ranks second in total NAWCA grants awarded, total NAWCA funds awarded and total project acres.
- Of the 16 joint ventures, the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture region ranks second in each category, as well.

Improved habitat conditions have benefited many bird species including (top) blue-winged teal, (center) American bittern and (bottom) Canada geese.

